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Edgar Mayhew Bacon

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The Story of a Barrel.*

BY EDGAR MAYHEW BACON.

A BARREL fell from a truck that was plowing its way up Nassau Street, but no one raised his voice to warn the driver, and never a soul cared a rush whether or not a dozen barrels lay in the street till the crack of doom.

People were hurrying, as we have a fashion of doing at the fag end of a day, each one intent upon his own affairs. A fine drizzle filled the air and a rich chocolate slush covered the ground.

At five o'clock Perry Wing came diving across the street, whistling, as usual. Perry's vitality at the close of a day's hard work was an exhibition of energy such as most people might covet for its commencement. When he saw the barrel he kicked it, sending it reeling and staggering across the street like a ridiculously pursy inebriate. By sheer good luck it kept an approximately vertical position till it reached the southeast curb, when it finally lost its equilibrium and toppled into the gutter.

In that position it lay for nearly ten minutes, when two boys saw it and stopped to investigate. To their invitation to move on it reluctantly responded, finally rolling half way down the block

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and foregathering with a company of other barrels that were obstructing the sidewalk in front of an art dealer's store. The temporary guardian of these latter, turning suddenly and seeing the boys endeavoring, as he supposed, to "pinch" one of his wooden wards, drove them away with loud objurgations.

"G'wan now! Ye little divils, if I get a holt ov ye I'll break yer necks, thryin' to stale me barrels. Lave that 'r I'll have ye arristed."

Stopping to herd the newcomer more closely with the rest of his flock, he noticed a combination of marks that to him were quite unintelligible.

"That dommed shippin' clerk 'll be doin' stunts wid his markin' brush till he gits it in th' neck from th' ould mon." Thus he grumbled while he carefully tried to obliterate the offending characters and substituted others corresponding with the rest of his consignment. Having done this he rapidly loaded the lot on his wagon and started off with them.

The other barrels upon the dray from which the particular barrel of this narrative had fallen were not light. They sat solid, erect, each upon its own substantial bottom, hardly deigning to bounce or to nudge its neighbor, even when the truck wheels cut a corner too closely or cannoned against other wheels. All were marked alike and the bill of lading that had announced their coming into the country, and the custom-house receipt that vouched their regular admission, showed no discrimination. The barrel that went astray was properly addressed, designated and checked with precisely the same series of hieroglyphics that all the others bore. It carried the name and mark of the same eminent shippers in Bordeaux, and was directed to the same reputable firm of importers, Messrs. Vinall & Vinall, on Warren Street, New York.

The truck went on its way unmoved by its loss till it was backed up at the door of Vinall & Vinall's establishment, where Varick Vinall, the junior partner, was waiting personally to receive and check its contents.

A fair, rather handsome fellow, of medium height, the young man stood hatless in the doorway, with a bill of lading in his hand, and waited impatiently while the truck was backed up and the skids run out. His quick eye noticed almost immediately the dis-

crepancy between the number of barrels that the paper called for and the actual count of those delivered. Twice he numbered them over, even touching each one in turn, to be sure that he had made no mistake. A look between relief and anxiety crossed his face.

"You have made a mistake," he told the driver. "You should have eleven barrels, and here are only ten." The driver counted and was puzzled.

"I mind there were eleven when I loaded, for I counted them on the wharf," he replied. "Here's the duplicate check the clerk gave me. 'Tis signed for eleven, sure. I took notice of ten besides the light one."

Varick gave a start and looked keenly at the man. "The light one" — he tried to speak quietly — "What light one?"

"One o' them was half as light again as the others. The inspector marked them while they was a settin' in a row or els't he wouldn't never have passed the lot the way he did. If he'd 'a' hefted that one that ain't here he'd of had the head off it in no time. Soon as I went to move 'em I noticed the differ, but it wasn't my place to tell the inspector his business."

While the man talked Vinall was tipping one barrel after another. He was making little effort now to conceal his anxiety.

"'Tain't no use, Sir," volunteered the driver. "When I unloaded there wasn't no light barrel; they was all full weight."

"You mean that you've lost it?" asked the young man, sternly.

"I don't mean to try to explain nothin' about it," answered the man. "'Tain't here — that's all I know."

"But it was there when you started."

"Even that I ain't sure of. I only know I thought I had it on, but as it ain't here it's likely I was mistaken."

"You may have dropped it."

The driver laughed derisively. "I been truckin' fer you, or rather fer your father and uncle, eighteen years, and that's the first time any one's ever accused me of droppin' anything."

Dismissing the man, Varick Vinall went back to his private office and, closing the door, took from his desk a letter directed in a peculiar, angular hand, and bearing a foreign postmark. It had evidently been read a number of times, for the fold of the paper had the worn look that love missives are said to assume after a

while. That this was no love-letter a look into Vinall's face as he read it would have convinced any one who could have seen him, though the writer was evidently a woman and, from the coronet that decorated her stationery, presumably a woman of rank.

The young man beat a tattoo with his left hand upon the desk and his right shook a little as he held the letter. In his fancy he could see the Princess Marie, with her proud, aristocratic, cruel face; he could hear the musical, incisive, pitiless voice, and the laugh that trickled through her brilliant speech as poison might drop through the channeled pattern of a curiously wrought poignard.

"Do you remember," ran the letter, "the night at Ivan's house in St. Petersburg?"

Could he ever hope to forget that night, when he, a young American, suddenly found himself surrounded by the members of a society so terrible in its aim and so ruthless in method that he shuddered, even there in his Warren Street office, to remember how nearly he had been involved in their discovery and ruin. Till that dreadful moment of awakening he had had no true conception of the purpose of the stealthy, dark-browed conspirators whom he encountered whenever he called at the luxurious lodgings of the Princess Marie. He adored her with all the fatuous idolatry of puppy love, and those acquaintances of hers, whom he endured for her sake, he imagined, at the worst, to be disappointed politicians to whom, in the plentitude of her charity, she was good.

Then came the memorable night when he discovered that the tales he had heard of nihilistic meetings and deadly plots against the lives of persons high in authority were not the inventions of American newspapers, as he had been wont to believe.

When the awakening came he had not time to control his horror at the revolting doctrines and merciless plans of the people who, for the Princess's sake, had admitted him as a member of their conclave. He remembered that this writer, this titled woman, this object of his almost hopeless boyish adoration, had saved him from his perilous position by staking her own life upon his discretion, letting that little world of fanatics suppose him her accepted lover.

Never had he quite understood. Did she really love him, in her imperious way? When he escaped from Russia, fleeing feverishly

through terrified nights and days, and never breathing freely till he found himself in the midst of London, had he taken with him the heart of this untamed, beautiful, tiger-like princess? Devoutly he hoped not, for hers would be a love at which a man might tremble. "Do you remember," asked the letter, "and can you suppose that I have forgotten?" Then it continued:

> Did you think when you returned to America that you could look back upon your friends in Russia as part of a troublesome dream from which you have awakened? You did not believe that I, to whom you did not even say farewell, could put out my hand across the land and the ocean to hold you still. Ah, my friend, have you not learned that a woman's wit is more far reaching than the arts of statecraft or the force of armies? Suppose that I might wish to destroy you, *mon ami*— What a little trifle of poison, of mechanism, of steel, would serve the purpose! But I fear I am addressing deaf ears. You have forgotten the Princess Marie, to whom in your ingenuous youth you made extravagant vows, which she believed would be at least as enduring as the bunch of roses over which they were breathed.
>
> All this is beside the point. I am writing to tell you that news travels very far and very fast in these days; and to illustrate a statement so trite I would tell you that the announcement of your approaching marriage to Miss Wing, of New York, has reached Paris, where I am staying till my own country affords a safer retreat outside of the Siberian camps.
>
> Receive the congratulations of one who feared that you might have taken too seriously the fiction of your Russian adventure.
>
> I am sending a little gift for your bride. It is a whim of mine that it shall not be taxed by your customs nor be advertised to your friends in New York, so I have made our mutual friends in Bordeaux my accomplices and my remembrance is under way with your latest consignment of wines.
>
> You will not betray us — no, I am not asking a concession, but stating a fact, — you will not betray us because you will not draw danger upon others while you yourself go free. You will observe how well I know your American nature.
>
> When you give my congratulations to your bride, I wonder if you will remember to tell her all that befell you in the city of the White Tsar? With a full recollection, on my part, of every incident, I am, once more, Yours,
>
> MARIE.

At his desk in the dark back office, at the end of the long avenue of barrels, Varick Vinall sat under a single gleam of electric light and stared at the Princess Ivanieff's letter as though he would decipher her meaning by some occult or clairvoyant means. After awhile the porter came to inquire if he should wait. "No," said Vinall. "Lock up and go home, I will let myself out."

Of one thing he was certain. If the Princess had ever loved him, as in his heart he cherished a vain fear that she did, then she would show him no mercy, but would play with him as a cat plays with its prey, only in the end to strike fatally. He had heard her

discuss the destruction of the Winter Palace and the violent death proposed for the Tsar, as another woman might discuss the texture of a piece of silk or the price of a bunch of violets. Had she forgiven him for leaving Russia and herself? The natural answer to the question he found in his own disinclination to remember his youthful adventure in St. Petersburg. He had never forgiven himself. Not that he still loved Marie, the Princess Ivanieff, if indeed his early infatuation had ever been love in reality. It was his pride, and, as he told himself, his gratitude, that he had done violence to when he escaped from the Russian capital.

Since then another light had come into his life, and in a maturer fashion he knew what love meant. To him it meant Jessamine Wing, and life had become one never-ending, joyous song, till this baleful breath from the past had come with its whisper of passion, bitterness, disruption, anarchy, death. That is the worst of having a past in which are mixed nihilistic associates.

At last the junior partner remembered that he must hasten home to dress for dinner, a dinner in family style, with Jessamine and her people. He had enjoyed playing the part of prospective bridegroom, but this night, as he closed his desk and turned the key in the office door, he wondered whether he could manage to forget, or at least to conceal for a few hours, the spectral care that had fastened upon him. Somewhere in the city, he was sure, a dreadful barrel containing an infernal machine that might at any moment wreck a building or cause the instant death of uncounted people, was astray in New York. Somehow he had fixed upon an infernal machine as the probable expression of the Princess Marie's vengeance.

He thought of applying to the police, but such a step would get both his own firm and their Bordeaux correspondents into untold difficulties, without gaining any advantage, for he cherished a deep conviction that the police would be about the last people in the city to discover the missing barrel. A private detective agency would be better. As soon as he could get away from the Wings' he would hunt up such a one. With that resolution, he put on as cheerful a face as possible and started up town.

If when eight o'clock came Varick Vinall had not forgotten his perplexity he had at least made a truce with it for an hour. Jessa-

mine Wing was a girl to make a man forget any troubles save those of her own causing, and Varick's troubles in that direction were things of the past, though he could remember, and afford a smile for, the days when, in company with twenty other men, he had danced a wearisome measure to this sweet siren's piping. Those days were now happily past, and to say that the young man was received with open arms is hardly a figure of speech.

Jessamine was good to look upon. Perfectly gowned in delicate gray, her graceful figure appeared to its best advantage, while her wonderful beauty seemed to her lover to border upon the supernatural. She hovered about him during the half hour before dinner was announced, rallying him upon his serious looks and convincing him, by arguments unanswerable as the call of a spring day, that nothing counted beside her irresistible personality.

At dinner, as they sat over the cheese and coffee, Perry suddenly broke in with an account of the barrel he had found derelict upon the intersection of Nassau and Beekman streets. Varick turned so suddenly towards his prospective brother-in-law that his cup was nearly overturned, and then, finding all eyes upon him, he made some lame excuse for his awkwardness, and begged Perry to go on with his interesting story.

"Why, it was nothing," protested that youth. "It seemed funny, sort of, to see a barrel standing in the middle of the street and everybody steering out of the way of it. It's a wonder some truck hadn't ground into it. It was light enough, for when I gave it a kick, for luck, it went half way across the street. I'll bet somebody has got a raking for losing it."

"You kicked it?" asked Varick in a tone of anxiety. "That strikes me as rather an unsafe thing to do. How do you know —" he caught himself — "You see if it had been heavy you'd have stubbed your toe like the devil," he concluded.

Jessamine laughed merrily. "It sounds exactly like Alice in the Looking Glass. "Kicked it: shouldn't have done that, wot's it ever done to you?" she quoted. Vinall managed to pull himself together and join in her laugh at his expense; but when the ladies had left the table and Mr. Wing, senior, who was not a smoker, made an excuse to leave the young men alone, our hero turned to Perry.

"I wish you'd tell me something about that barrel," he said eagerly. "Did you see how it was marked? Do you know what became of it?"

Perry looked at him curiously. "Gee whiz, old man—you don't mean to say that I got a rise out of you with my barrel story? No, 'pon my word I didn't even look to see whether it was marked at all; and as to what became of it I haven't any more idea than the man in the moon. Does it belong to you?"

"Look here, Perry," said his vis-à-vis, "I have a mind to tell you something, but you must check your natural effervescence for awhile and act like a rational being. Do you feel willing to try the experiment?"

"Fire away," said the youth. "It must be pretty bad, after such a preface, but I am hard to shock. What did you have shut up in the barrel? Did it have its arms and legs packed with it, and do you think they'll ever be able to prove it on you?"

"Well, if that's the way—"

"Oh, hold on, Varick; I'll behave, give you my word. I will hold my tongue as long as you like and give you the benefit of my advice without drawing on you for more than one box of cigars a month. Here, I'll hold up my right hand to it."

After a moment's hesitation Varick began an account, an expurgated account it is true, but nevertheless an exciting one, of what he knew about the barrel and its contents. He said nothing, why should he, about the Princess Marie, and his former infatuation for that temptress. An enemy, he told Perry, an enemy in Russia, had sent a deadly machine concealed in a barrel and further covered by a regular bill of lading from Bordeaux, and having been informed of its arrival in New York he was waiting to receive and put it out of the way of doing any harm, when it suddenly disappeared.

The boy, sobered by the importance of this news, was saying softly to himself: "And I kicked it. Gee whiz! I kicked it."

"Of course," Varick admitted, "there is no evidence that your barrel and mine were the same; but when you take the time, place and other conditions into account, it seems scarcely probable that two accidents of that kind have taken place so near together."

"I'll bet a hat it is your barrel all right," insisted Perry. "The

only thing to do is to find it. Of course it isn't there now, though it might be almost anywhere along Nassau Street all night without anybody moving it. Tell you what I'll do," he suddenly exclaimed; "I believe I'll just take a run down there this evening and make sure that it isn't there."

"And I," added Varick, throwing a third of his cigar into the ash tray, "I will wait for you at my rooms and if you don't find any trace of it we'll go to Ketcham, the detective fellow, and let him hunt it out."

When Varick was alone with Jessamine she rallied him on his sober looks.

"What have you and Perry been talking about all this while? Did you finally settle about that old barrel?"

"Barrel?" asked Varick, with a fine assumption of ignorance. "What barrel?"

"What barrel — why, the one he told us about, of course. You seemed tremendously interested."

"Oh, that?" said Varick slowly. "Yes, I remember now that Perry told a story about a barrel. I wonder whose it was, and what became of it."

Two hours later Vinall was in his rooms on Gramercy Park, waiting for the return of Perry from his Nassau Street mission. Suddenly the bell rang violently and young Wing appeared, hatless, dripping, breathless, but evidently in high good humor.

"Gee whiz! I was in luck to get here," he announced as soon as he could find his voice. He had flung himself into the open arms of a Morris chair and panted audibly.

"Had a run for it, but I got here," ran the brief instalment of his narrative. "Lucky I didn't get run in for larceny. Oh, Varick! you ought to have been there."

"What in Heaven's name are you talking about?" asked Varick. "Did you see anything of the barrel?"

"See it? Well, say. See it? Why man alive, I've got it."

Varick jumped to his feet and stood over the boy as though he purposed to compel him to a degree of coherency.

"What are you talking about?"

"The barrel. I saw it, I pinched it, I got away with it. Veni, Vide, Vici — but I had to run for it and I nearly got gobbled."

Varick bent over so that he could take the youngster by the shoulders. "Talk sense!" he shouted.

"Ouch! I am talking sense. I tell you I saw your old barrel before I had got half way down to Maiden Lane. It was up against a store door where somebody had put it. I knew it because it was the only barrel anywhere around. Then I got a cab and paid the man ten dollars to help me get the barrel aboard. I had to load him with a cock-and-bull yarn to make him do it. No sooner did we get it safely up than somebody appeared from somewhere with a cop and he shouted to us to stop. You bet we weren't stopping. We've pretty near killed the old skate driving around the city to get rid of the finest; way up to Central Park and back. It's outside now."

"What's outside?"

"Why, the barrel, of course."

Varick's room really seemed the safest place to put it. The cabby wouldn't have anything more to do with it, and they did not dare to leave it in the street. So up the steps they struggled and finally deposited their burden in the room that the junior member of the firm of Vinall & Vinall called his library.

After the cabby had gone, his disturbed temper soothed by another liberal fee, Varick turned to an inspection of the barrel. In a moment he staggered back and leaned, dizzy and bewildered, against the door.

"Hello," cried Perry. "What's the matter?"

"Can't you see," gasped Varick. "You've gone and stolen somebody else's barrel!"

Next morning, of course, the papers were full of accounts, variously colored, of the operations of a bold band of thieves who had committed depredations along Nassau Street, and concerning whom the police, it would seem, had any number of clues. One ray of hope Vinall entertained when he recognized in the chief complainant in the affair the name of a fellow club member. To arrange the matter satisfactorily cost him an elaborate luncheon and sundry long, cold bottles, besides much valuable time, but in the end the police clues were abandoned and the purloined barrel found itself back in Nassau Street again.

Meantime an eminent firm of detectives had undertaken to un-

ravel the mystery that was turning Varick Vinall's happy anticipations to gall and wormwood. As the days passed they made his life a burden, dogging his steps and prying into his private affairs, seeking interviews at inopportune times, sending him mysterious messages, and even waking him from his unrestful slumbers at night to ask for instructions or report new clues. Gradually he began to feel that the ground beneath his feet was undermined, one vast subway, so to speak, from which at any moment he might expect the explosion of unnumbered and multiplied barrels.

As his wedding day approached, Varick's mental condition became noticeable to his closest friends, though none but Perry suspected the cause, as he now gave the subject of barrels a respectful avoidance. Jessamine was not blind to the fact that her lover was gloomy and preoccupied, but she was loyally hopeful that she could charm away any evil spirit when once her influence should be constant.

They had arranged to be married on her birthday anniversary, which was the seventeenth of December; and then, instead of going away upon a wedding journey, they proposed to baffle the curiosity of their friends and balk the expectations of their social world by retiring quietly to their new house on Fifty-seventh Street, where they would spend a fortnight in delightful seclusion. The house was the gift of Mr. Wing, and for weeks before the happy event carpets, furniture, pictures, and even bric-à-brac had been in place, awaiting the homecoming of the bride and groom.

Varick hoped upon that day to escape the distasteful attendance of his detective satellites. He cursed the hour when he had confided to them his difficulties and began to wonder whether after all the barrel with its deadly contents could be half as troublesome as the sleuths whose protection he had invoked. His hopes of reprieve were vain. The chief detective met him on the church steps and transfixed him with mysterious glances. The second human blood-hound stood just inside the church door and ostentatiously refrained from claiming recognition. The bridegroom felt, with a sinking of the heart, that they were destined to become to him what the old man of the sea was to Sindbad, and that he was saddled with them forever.

How he got through the ceremony he knew as little as any

bridegroom. As in a dream he heard the minister pronounce the time-honored formula that proclaimed his lifelong union with the one woman in all the world. Then he turned with her to receive the congratulations of their friends, and immediately his eyes fell upon a detective.

That evening, after an elaborate pretence of departure for Washington, the new-made benedict and his bride were sitting in the library of their new house and congratulating themselves that they had successfully eluded even the society reporters. As the dusk gathered they had not thought it necessary to light the room and the only illumination filtered from the street lamps through the curtained windows. Varick felt like a free man, relieved from the incubus of his stealthy attendants, and Jessamine in her heart rejoiced that already her hopes of dispelling his gloom were being realized.

After awhile their tender confidences were rudely interrupted by a sound as though some one were moving in the hall.

"I am sure I heard a footstep," said Jessamine.

"Hush. Stay where you are, I will go and see," answered Varick, but she would not be left behind.

Together they stole through the hall. Some one had a light in the little room at the rear of the house, and thither Varick went without hesitation and flung the door wide open.

"What do you mean — " He got no further, for there facing him stood the sleuths. Between them, upon the floor, sat a large tub and resting in it a soaking barrel, over which a stream of water was playing from a hose. Numerous gimlet-holes perforated the barrel and into these the water ran, so that whatever perishable goods it contained must have been reduced to pulp and any explosive substance made paste.

"We have got your barrel," said the head detective.

"We have soaked it so that it may be opened with safety," added his companion.

Jessamine was clinging to Varick's arm in terrified silence till these last words were uttered, but they seemed to restore her senses and she cried:

"Varick, what does it mean? What are these men doing and how did they get in here?"

"Why," stammered Varick, aroused by this appeal from his wife, and suddenly conscious that they had stumbled upon a matter of which he had tried so long to keep her in ignorance. "Why, dear — these men are — are — some friends of mine; some, ah, chemists that were to try an experiment and they came here instead of going to the office. I will explain to you when I have more time. These — these gentlemen will retire and we — they — will continue the experiment some other time."

But the head detective was dogged. "We're not going to leave this till we get at the inside of it," he said. "We've been a week soaking it and now we're going to open it before it dries on us."

"Oh, let them open it. I want to stay and see them," implored Jessamine.

"All right," groaned the distracted Varick. "Go ahead, and let's have it over with."

Cautiously the men removed the head of the barrel. To their surprise there was no cunningly contrived mechanism attached to it. With gingerly caution they thrust their hands into the packing, pulling out bushels of water-logged paper and littering the wet floor with it.

At last, from the very centre of the mass they extracted a package, to which was attached a card upon which, in scarcely decipherable characters, was written:

> For Varick Vinall's bride.
> To be given her upon the day of the wedding,
> with the good wishes of her husband's friend,
> MARIE IVANIEFF.

The little party looked at one another, and then Varick, with trembling fingers untied and opened the package. Folded tight within it, wet and dripping and shapeless, lay what might have been a wad of fine spun cobweb. In a moment it was in Jessamine's hands and being unfolded — yards and yards of priceless lace, fine as mist, beautiful to a woman's eyes as any masterpiece of art that the world cherishes.

The sleuths looked puzzled. They turned to Varick with an inquiry, but he forestalled them.

"You see," he said, "You have been on the wrong scent. This is unheard-of stupidity, to enter my house and almost ruin a wedding gift designed for my wife. Really, I never heard of a more outrageous piece of work in my life. You will be good enough to call at my office in the morn — no, I mean in a fortnight from now, and try to explain your blunder, if you can. For the present I wish to be left alone."

When the detectives were gone Jessamine spent an hour in handling the gift of the Princess, shaking out each fold with delicate touch and tenderly spreading the wonderful fabric where it might dry unharmed.

"O Varick," she breathed at last, "What a dear woman she must be, and what a friend of yours. Only a friend, I know, because if she had loved you she would never have sent me such a gift."

The Soup That Talked.*

BY DON MARK LEMON.

IT was right here in this restaurant that it happened. I'll remember it long after I forget my debts. I was sitting over there at that table in that end seat, while across there at that other table was a man with a big, ugly scar on his forehead and only one eye.

Well, I saw him look up suddenly with a start of recognition, and then he ducked his head and sort of hid his face in his beard, and just then a meek, smiling little man, in a gray tweed suit, hung up his hat and sat down opposite the one-eyed man.

He put on his glasses, tucked a napkin under his chin, and, taking the bill-of-fare from between the vinegar and ketchup bottles, studied it like it were a chess-board, and he was about to make a difficult move.

The girl came and stood by his chair. "I guess I'll take a little soup," he ordered, smiling over the top rims of his glasses.

The girl brought the soup, a glass of water and a piece of butter, and got his order for roast beef, rare, vegetables and tea; then she went back to the kitchen and the little man, the one-eyed chap and myself were left alone with our three plates of soup.

It was what is called alphabet soup — that thin, clear soup, with little noodle or cracker letters in it. The students that eat here call it A B C chowder. The letters swell after they're in the soup, but even then they aren't a third of an inch long. It always strikes me as a sort of humorous soup.

Well, the little man was about to begin on his plate, when the one-eyed chap across from him accidentally brushed his fork off the table to the floor, and in stooping to get it, kicked it farther under the table. As the little man pushed back his chair and groped for the fork, obliging like, I saw the one-eyed fellow

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quickly pass his hand over the other's plate of soup, as if he were dropping something into it.

The little man recovered the fork, returned it to his neighbor, and taking up his spoon, was about to begin eating, when his hand was suddenly stayed, and his face turned kind of gray, as if he saw a ghost in his plate.

Another instant he looked up with his eyes sticking out like a frog's behind his glasses, and yelled, "Poisoned!"

The one-eyed chap jumped as if some one had flung a noose about his neck, seized his hat and rushed into the street.

"Hallo!" I cried, "what's wrong?"

The little man, with his spoon in his hand and his napkin tucked under his chin, stared from me to the vacant seat, and then back to his soup. *"Poisoned!"* he repeated.

I got up and looked over his shoulder into his soup. By George! if eight of those little noodle letters hadn't arranged themselves this way

P O I S O N E D

The little chap looked at me slyly. "Do you imagine the cook did it for a joke?" he asked.

"The cook!" I exclaimed, noticing a blue sediment in the soup that wasn't in mine. "Oh, yes, certainly! very likely! *You blamed idiot!*"

He gave me a hurt look.

"You blamed idiot!" I repeated. "I saw that one-eyed man drop something into your plate when you got his fork, and it is only because these little cracker letters happened, one time in a million, to form the word *poisoned* that you aren't a dead man! Why! It's a miracle — nothing short of providential that you're alive."

I called the proprietor, explained the circumstances, and had the soup taken to a chemist. The blue sediment was the deadliest, swiftest poison known.

It isn't every punch in your meal ticket that causes a plate of soup to talk and saves a man's life.

"In the Lodge of the Mother of Men."*

BY ETHEL CLAIRE RANDALL.

MEHETABEL shuffled along the boom with a gait peculiarly her own. Overhead the hot reds of an August sunset were merging into violet-gray. Beneath, the swirling waters of the river swayed the long boom backward toward the dam over which they spread, a broad apron of combed spray. A few logs, close against the opposite bank, were "running" the river, and numerous "dead-heads" bobbed in the current like otters swimming with the stream. But Mehetabel, tilting far backward as if top-heavy from the weight of the battered, red felt hat crowning her head, continued her way, unheeding. Time and constant wear had only partly moulded to the angles of her figure a green suit, which had about it the air of having sometime been the property of another woman at once smaller and richer. The skirt sagged into a "dip" in the back, hitched up in front, displaying coarse laced boots, spiked, many sizes too big for the feet they encased, and the jacket yawned open, disclosing a faded lavender cotton shirt-waist. Her face was egg-shaped, bleak, and dominated by eyes too large for her other features, and almost colorless. Yet in them, by right of a savage splendor of gaze, lay the power to make one blind to the defects in their owner's person, clear-sighted only to the crudely conceived but magnificent ideals which lighted them.

As she trudged along now, with the unconcern of an experienced lumber-jack, the twilight ebbed in, so that by the time she had scrambled up the bank to the log shack of the dam-tender, the night had come. She propped her fishing-rod by the door and entered. It was too dark within to see any object distinctly, but she groped her way about, falling over a sleeping dog as she did so, reached down

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a lantern and lit it with a coal from the cooking-stove. The old dog yapped listlessly; a gaunt figure in a querulous rocking-chair — Mehetabel's brother Abe — awoke sluggishly, and, blinking into the candle-flame, threw out the remark tentatively, that Reub was "here-a-bouts aspoonin' ev Nancy."

Mehetabel vouchsafed no response. A spray of glistening scales flew from under the vigorous strokes of her knife to the floor.

"Shouldn't wonder ef they made a match uv it. Reub's a mighty fine-lookin' feller."

"What did he come down here for? The drive isn't within twenty-five miles of here," demanded Mehetabel, slapping the slices of cleaned fish back and forth through a little mound of corn-meal, before she tossed them into the pan.

"That's so. They're aworkin' gettin' the logs 'round the bend at the 'Fork.' They're goin' to let 'em jam here fer a couple a' days till they get through up there. Reub says the water in the lake ain't ben so low, ner sech dryness, sense the fire in '77. Gosh, but it's hard on the farmers."

Abe relaxed into silence. Presently Reub and Nancy entered, and the four sat down to supper. From the lantern suspended to the rafters, a sharp circle of light shone down upon the table, defining the features of those about it, but, at the same time, exaggerating the characteristic of each. Greed was as tangibly written on her brother's face as was fanaticism on Mehetabel's, or simple honesty and faith on that of the florid lumberman. Nancy's countenance alone baffled decipherment. Dark, piquant, quaintly featured, framed in a fluff of short, powdery hair, likewise dark, it was childishly drowsy, and lacking in any hint of the family likeness traceable in the faces of her half-brother and sister. The colors and method of an impressionist would most fittingly portray Mehetabel, but any medium less delicate than pastel would fail of doing justice to Nancy. Hidden away behind that odd little mask, almost any trait of character might lurk — a fact which in no wise lessened Reub's frankly admiring glances.

When Reub rose to go, with many apologies for not staying longer — his time was not his own and he must make the town to-night — Mehetabel rose also, saying that her head ached and she would like a row. Nancy silently made a show of washing the

dishes, at which Mehetabel pivoted around, sharply admonishing her to "keep her hands out of the dish-water. Goodness knows she had been told often enough." And Abe, limping about, bustled over to an ancient Wangan-chest, relic of his father's river-days, for a "whig uv 'Peerless' fer Reub."

It was the dark of the moon. The stars were in great part obscured by shreds and tatters of scud, weaving across the sky, so that Mehetabel, in the bow of the punt facing Reub as he steered, could make out little more than the virile bulk of the man. But she could feel his mild brown eyes fixed upon her wonderingly because of her strange request, while he patiently awaited her pleasure. Pity for the hurt she must inflict welled up, and she was still so long that it was he who finally spoke first:

"You wanted me alone out here to say something about Nancy, Mehetabel?"

"Oh, Reub, you love her! Don't say anything. I know how much, and Abe's willing that you should marry her. But she's all I have. Before her mother died, just after father was killed and Abe crippled by that falling tree, she said to me, 'Mehetabel, you've been a daughter to me — be a mother to little Nancy.' And I've tried, Oh, I have tried." The girl hastened on glibly, fearful lest she should break down before the ominous silence of the man in the stern. "My mother was a school-teacher, you know, and she taught me everything she knew. So I passed on what knowledge I had to Nancy, in spite of Abe's thinking a girl is better without so much learning. Abe never would learn anything — he was going to the woods like father. Abe has money saved up, though. He's hoarded every cent he could lay his hands on. I've begged and prayed him to give it to me to educate Nancy and make something of her. She isn't fit for this life. Look at me."

Mehetabel paused, that the full effect of her words might tell.

"Abe thinks there's nobody like Nancy, either. If he hadn't fancied you, perhaps he might have let me have the money by now, and that, with what I have of my own, would have taken us to a city where Nancy could go to school and learn accomplishments, and then perhaps teach in a young ladies' academy, and have everything fine and dainty about her, as she deserves. Abe could get along till Nancy got settled, and then I'd come back to him.

I'm not the kind Nancy would be associating with then."

Again she paused, but this time it was for breath and for an answer. Some time since, Reub had ceased paddling, and was now standing motionless, notwithstanding the jagged drifting of the punt.

"Can't you see," she cried, "can't you see! Why don't you say something! I would do anything on earth for her, though I am only her half-sister. Everything depends on you, whether she is buried alive here or goes out into the beautiful world and lives — lives!"

"I'd better take you back." Reub had found his voice, but it was a trifle more throaty than usual. "We've gone too far for you to walk," and with that he wormed the boat's nose back into the flow. Neither spoke. Mehetabel was frightened. She could make nothing of this frozen Reub, so different from the old, breezy, great-hearted, generous Reub she knew so well. But as Reub, at the first chafing of the boat against the tiny landing below the dam, dropped his paddle and, slipping his hands under her arm-pits, swung her quickly ashore, Mehetabel imprisoned his hand in both of hers.

"Oh, Reub, Reub," she sobbed, "Won't you even say good-night to me?"

Then, as his fingers lay passive between hers, she let them drop and crept to the cabin. Nancy had gone to bed, and the scent of a pipe told that Abe dozed in his bunk. Mehetabel drooped on to a stump against the door-lintel. She was too hot and too excited to be mewed within. Out there in the shadowless lethargy of the dark she felt at one with her surroundings as never before. Why was the woodland steeped in this ghostly hush? Was the wild with its creatures steeling itself to breast some untoward shock, even as she?

A cry, like the sobbing of a young child spent with emotion and quieting into rest, shivered through the blistering air from the near distance. Even the animals in the cabin clearing were astir and uneasy. From the direction of the river an incessant, soft, irregular thudding of half-soaked logs, hammering against the boom above the piers of the dam, marked a rhythm in the turbulent tones of the forest.

"Abe, Oh, Abe!" Mehetabel called, and again, "Oh, A-a-be!" but Abe's only reply being a resounding snore, she reassured Nancy:

"Go back to sleep, dear. Nothing but a cat nosing after the hens. I'll take a torch and look around and open the boom; the logs are coming down pretty fast."

That accomplished, she crept over her sleeping sister into the side of the bunk nearest the wall.

The next morning there was little change, except that now and then a capful of breeze gushed up, and the keen edge of the forest sounds was blunted by the day-noises. In the east the sodden sky was dark-streaked.

Abe refused to get up when he was called. He "felt heavy-like, an' his head swum, an' his ole wound was makin' a misery in his side, worritin' him consider'ble."

Mehetabel was considerably worried also. Not about her brother. Indeed, she seldom gave him a thought beyond wondering where he could have spirited his money, and whether or no she would ever have the feel of it on her palms. Putting two and two together, her heart sank. What could it signify, this stagnant deadness of the atmosphere, this faint smack of stale smoke tainting the air, the unaccustomed sight of deer, and rabbits, and a fox, coming to the water!

"I wish Reub were here," she kept repeating to herself, and the reiterated phrase gave her some comfort. To Nancy, whose sweetness was sorely taxed in tending to Abe, she spoke cheerily:

"Nance, dear, I'm going up the Knoll. There ought to be thimble-berries left. You and Abe would like a dish for supper."

Nancy widened her eyes. "You had better stay in, hadn't you? It's brooding for a storm."

Once outside the limits of the stump-land, Mehetabel made the best of her speed to the Knoll — a rock-ridge tufted sparsely with pines — that rose at a distance of a mile from the cabin, overlooking the surrounding country. Mehetabel locked her hands above her eyes, and quailed at the sight spread to her view — the forest was ablaze!

She idled for no second glance. All the horrors she had ever heard related of the fire of '77 flashed into her mind, lengthening

the distance she had come by double and over. She saw the river strangled with logs: below the dam they heaved and rolled for two full miles, with but here and there a slit of gray between; above, they were packed as snug as the length in a raft everywhere, except along the piers and down the chute, where they stood upright like driven piles, their raw red ends glistening with the wet, or tumbled criss-cross like a child's house of straws. Plainly, there was little to be looked for at this point, while across the stream there was even less, since the bank stretched away in an acre or more of sunken land, rice-swamp and dead timber, flanked on either side with pale-stemmed beech and birch trees about an underbrush of currant-bushes, grape-vines and scarlet-creepers, tangled into an impassable wilderness. On this side, the bank reared perpendicularly out of the water, a bluff of golden sand, netted with flickering leaf-shadows of overhanging wild cherry-trees.

As she turned homeward, the sight of charred tree-trunks, fire-riddled to the semblance of grotesquely-fashioned totem-poles, glimpsed among the trees, warned her to make haste. Nevertheless, on nearing the door, the drawling of Nancy's gentle tones arrested her attention, and out of sheer astonishment that confidence should be extended to Abe, when toward her, Mehetabel, the girl's attitude had invariably been one of still, gracious acquiescence, she stopped in her tracks.

"I think you are too much wrought up about it, Abe," his sister was saying, "I owe everything to Mehetabel. She has done everything for me, and sacrificed everything, as you very well know. She was clever enough to have gone somewhere and earned all those things she delights in herself, and has never had, and craves for me. But she couldn't do that and care for me, too. I can't see that there's anything left to do but for you to give Mehetabel your money and let us go when you get better. As soon as ever I've learned some more, I'll pay you back. Truly I will."

Abe snorted. "Why, gull durn it, Nance, yer plum daffy, why! ye love the feller!"

To Mehetabel there was a finality in the exclamation that rooted her to the spot, and Nancy's next words came to her like words in a dream.

"Yes. I love him," Nancy assented. "How could I help

it? There's nobody on earth like Reub; so grand and tender."

The sigh with which the little confession ended was a stab to Mehetabel's hitherto unquenchable faith in her sisterly ability to shape Nancy's life along lines that seemed to her to promise most for the young girl's happiness. Angrily she burst in upon them.

"The woods are on fire!" she cried, and watched with a certain barbarous exultation the blanching of Abe's gnarled face and Nancy's swift uprising.

"We'll hev ter take ter the river, it's our one chance," said Abe, wrenching himself painfully to a sitting posture. "Nance, do you put some stuff ter eat in a bag an' fill two er three of them jars with water; the river won't be fit ter touch fer cinders, ef the wind keeps on. An' Mehetabel, yer'll hev ter get the boats inter the water. I wish ter heaven Reub was here, he'd—"

"The punt is useless," Mehetabel cut in, "you forgot to draw her up last night and the logs stove her in, and the first bit of clear water is beyond Bird Spring—"

Abe whistled weakly, but Mehetabel continued:

"I'll portage the canoe and run back to help—"

Nancy drew in her breath, half-swallowing her words with it—"The canoe only holds two—" her eyes questioned Mehetabel, then Abe. "Two," she repeated, her gaze upon Mehetabel.

Her sister laughed tersely.

"Somebody has got to get word to the loggers, I suppose," she retorted, "you're hardly fit for a night ride through woods teeming with crazed animals."

And she flashed out, her ears singing under Abe's parting sally:

"Reub would hev stayed ef it hadn't a' ben fer yer sulkin' round same as a bear lickin' a sore paw."

Deftly and easily, as one accustomed to act for oneself, she tipped out the mat of pine-boughs, hoisted the canoe, bottom-side up, over her head, and staggered through the open to the old corduroy road that rambled to Willowcagen. Now and again, a wayside berry-bush rent her skirt, but she jerked it loose mechanically, heedless alike of it, and the flaunting sumac-tassels, and the gorgeous columns of the Autumn-tinted oaks that lined the way to Bird Spring. Once there and eased of her burden, she flung her length upon the sand to drink of the water as wild creatures do.

Somewhat refreshed, she started along the road she had come, and, about a third of the distance from the close, met her brother and sister trudging along: Abe with bent knees and inclining torso that gave him the appearance of a rusty, half-closed jack-knife; Nancy trundling a little cart after her and panting softly in her excitement. Mehetabel wanted to cry at the sight. Instead, she wrapped her arm around Abe's waist, wound her fingers into his belt, and hurried him over the grass-grown trail.

None of the three said anything; each was choked with thoughts. When they sighted the spring, however, Abe spoke huskily:

"Mehetabel, yer'd better let out the hens an' the beasts. It'll give 'em a fighting chance fer life anyhow. Tike's gone. I never knowed a dog like that desert his folks before. 'Tisn't nat'ral-like. An', girl, be careful goin' back. The wolves is powerful bold. They're so 'fraid ev this scourge, they've lost their fear ev us. Why, when we wus leavin' the door, one planted himself right before us an' didn't offer ter move, till I hit him on the snout."

Mehetabel nodded; all the while stowing the kit under the shelter of the decks. Abe was helped into the bow. Nancy refused to follow. She clung wistfully to Mehetabel, not making any outcry, but with the mute tenacity of a drowning man, till Mehetabel was forced to shake her off roughly and place her in the stern.

Then Mehetabel did a thing that seemed strange to Nancy's yearning eyes. With Abe's blue marking pencil she scribbled upon a birch-stump close at hand, hacked the square of bark loose, bound it into a roll with a willow-withe and handed it to Nancy.

"Give this to Reub, please," she said, without looking at the girl, and as her sister pocketed the note, Mehetabel launched the boat, and running along the logs, piloted it hither and thither into clear water, now drawing it after her by the painter, now sidling it out of harm's way hooked to a pivie. Hopping from one log to another, heaving and pushing and straining, Mehetabel finally freed the canoe, and her "Now, Nancy!" was a relief to them all, — for it was trickish work handling a canoe among those pounding logs and frequent dead-heads in a dusk hot as high noon and reeling with fine, smutty particles.

Nancy drove deep with her paddle. The little boat rocked and sped away down-stream. Nancy's mouth was parched. But Abe,

focusing his eyes under hands held blinker-wise, called back to the figure teter-tottering with the bowing of the log it rode:

"Yer game, dead game! Before the Lord, Mehetabel, yer ought ter hev ben a man!"

During the few seconds before the disappearance of the canoe in the darkness, Mehetabel dallied upon the log, "bruling" it automatically under her feet. The wind, unnoted by her, had freshened into a steady rush of air, vivid with forest-clamors. To Mehetabel the sound was a battle-call. Arousing herself, she worked her way to shore and struck into the lumber-road, which brought her to the cabin. Her presence stirred a new note in the outcry of the few beasts that had been unable to effect their escape from the enclosure, as if their instincts taught them to turn to her in their distress. She recognized the need and, without more ado, went the rounds, giving to each its "fightin' chance."

Abe's big sorrel horse, Winchester, an old habitué of the race-track, she led out of the corral by the mane. Bridling him with a picket-line, she mounted and set out smartly for the "Fork."

Fortunately, the way leading to the winter-camp of the lumbermen was an ordinary country road, uncorrugated with logs. That was the single element in Mehetabel's favor, since fear goaded the horse on blindly in spite of her caresses.

An hour of keen going. Another. Yet another. Suddenly the pungent night-wind seethed with sound. The horse, his fore-feet grappling the air, his nostrils blown wide, quivered at the baleful jargon. With poised head, Mehetabel attempted to catch the direction whence the frightful sounds came. Winchester leaped sidewise, almost unseating her; then lurched ahead, the branches of the bordering trees whipping in her face. Mehetabel sickened and became dizzy. Hemming her in on all sides, calling and answering from this quarter and from that, the resonant baying of timber wolves jarred through her.

Involuntarily she took a better purchase in the horse's ribs with her knees and tried to think. She could recognize no landmarks as yet, though a somber terra-cotta hue was steadfastly filtering through the darkness, and livid gashes cut the pallid sky above the Knoll toward the east, where the fire was gobbling all before it with gluttonous zest; half an hour at most, she calculated, ought

to bring her to the camp, if her mount could keep the pace. So long as she gave Winchester his head, she knew he would keep to the road, while to attempt to ford the river ahead of the drive would be scarcely short of suicide. Still, noosing her round about was a lurid-eyed, slavering body-guard.

She untied the picket-rope, and coiling it into five great loops and ends, swung it taut; then hit out with the full force of her arm among the glaring, disembodied green eyes, and white-tusked jowls that snapped and snarled, fiend-like, at the horse's heels. The bedlam of voices joined in one sullen, blatant yowl of pain and rage, and, for a moment, the marauders baulked. The respite was short, but the girl was ready when again they webbed her round, each trumpet-mouthed with his own hunting cry. She lashed out. A second time the band dwindled into the shadows.

She made good the time in coaxing the horse out of his shambling trot. He swayed every now and then, and his hide was mottled with sweat, while the ravenous trackers, lured by his exhaustion, jostled forward in spite of all Mehetabel's efforts, and leaping up, bit at his heaving sides. In their impatience to attack their game, they no longer melted away from the blows the girl rained upon them. She urged the jaded sorrel forward, but with greatest difficulty livened him out of a walk. He staggered violently, between short, wild spurts of speed, so that Mehetabel needed both hands to hold her seat.

Since she had left off striking at them, the wolves had trailed without cry. They had tasted blood. The prey might fairly be counted theirs. The struggle had taken on a grimmer aspect; the silence was galled only by the spasmodic beats of the horse's hoofs, and his almost human cry of anguish when one or another of the furious brutes dug its fangs into his flesh, or if it missed, the crisp click of the beast's jaws closing on emptiness. The awful plight of the bleeding horse, dogged at every step by the sinister, velvet-footed march of shag-coated wolves, hungering for him to flounder, whetted Mehetabel's fear almost to the point of madness.

Her wail of defeat was echoed by a shriek of mortal agony from Winchester. Dark streaks, each streak a lank, lithe, sinuous body, shot before her eyes. The horse shuddered, stiffened under her, and, almost before she could touch the ground, slanted against a

tree-trunk — dead. Mehetabel, still clutching the rope in her vise-like hold, struggled to her feet for the finish.

A loud hallooing and the flame-arcs of spinning fire-brands saluted her. Arms that felt strong and comfortable cradled her to a broad chest and bore her within the radiance of the camp-fires. Eager faces turned upon her. There was a scurrying of men from the tents. The odor of steaming coffee assailed her nostrils. The whole paraphernalia of the summer logging-camp, the great sooty kettles hanging from the crane, the articles of clothing strewed about on the bushes to dry, the blacksmith's grinding-stone beside a heap of pikes and pivies, the gaping bean-hole, bedded with bark-embers, the bateaux, their stems jutting out of the water by reason of the sharp slope of the beach, all, from their very familiarity, thinned her pulse-beats. The crushing load of responsibility slipped from her shoulders. She had just strength enough for the message she had risked so much to utter, before she fainted — smiling up into the face of Foreman Clancy.

It was afternoon when she awoke to find herself curled up on a comforter in the bottom of one of the bateaux, with Luke, the assistant-cook, crouched beside her, the lap of his checked gingham apron full of cookies and crab-apples. His old face, brown and rugged as if carved on the shell of a walnut, mellowed at the sight, and he held out his apron by the corners invitingly. They had come to the log-jam, and the men, having abandoned their bateaux, were crowding about the cook-boat, stuffing food into their clothing bags. Foreman Clancy walked the logs to where the bateau, in which Luke and Mehetabel were sitting, was caught against the solid breastwork of cut timber.

"Awake?" he asked of Mehetabel, lifting her in his arms and heading the procession of men over the logs.

"I can walk."

"Likely story. You'd tumble at the second step. Mighty lucky thing for you, little woman, that you got in when you did. Twenty minutes more an' we'd have ben on the river. We sensed as how there was a fire hereabouts an' allowed that we might get the boats through here if we were anyway speedy. Portagin' 'em is out of the question — a squirrel couldn't ferret a track on the Jerry County side an' all Pine County is a ragin' furnace."

"The cabin," gasped Mehetabel, "is it burned?"

"Don't look, you can't see anything much but smoke. Even the logs in the edge of the water are simmerin'. Them ole bleached deadheads that wus hauled and piled on the bank last Fall, did the mischief there. It's the best of our play to keep to the Jerry side till we get to water. We'll have to trust to rafts to make Willowcagen."

Mehetabel buried her face in Clancy's home-spun shoulder. Luke, mistaking the motive, arranged a wet handkerchief across her eyes and mouth. She thanked him gratefully.

For seemingly hour upon hour she was borne over the logs by Foreman Clancy. Would they never be over the jam!

A shout! At last they must have reached uncovered water. She was raising her head to see, when the Foreman perched her on his shoulder. A cheer rang out about the surging of the flames.

Mehetabel rubbed her eyes. Yonder in the open water, she saw a flotilla of craft of every kind. Willowcagen had emptied itself of boats and of men in the good cause.

"Is she all right?" queried a voice at Clancy's elbow.

"As a trivet," he returned. And Mehetabel was shifted into another pair of arms and into a boat, before she realized that it was Reub's kind eyes meeting hers.

A diffidence, unusual in her, tied her tongue. Reub, putting her silence down to the hubbub of noises and her fatigue, shouted to her that her people got to the village safe and sound; Mrs. Shortee took them in and was doctoring up Abe, — he was picking up, — and mothering Nancy; the girl was bound to come with the men to find Mehetabel; but he had persuaded her to stay with her brother.

So Nancy had listened to him! Mehetabel stifled a groan. And he had been unmanly, ungenerous, to take advantage of her absence, when she had trusted him! The unreasoning anger kindled in Mehetabel's breast. She could have struck him where he stood, good-humoredly yelling to the men to give him a breathing-space, and manœuvering his canoe so as to distance the crush of boats.

He on his part was quick to spell out the meaning of the pulsing jaw-bones and narrowed eye-lids.

"Your thoughts ain't worthy of either you er me, Mehetabel," he said moodily, "an' this is hardly the time er place to have it

out. Nance gave me your note. It wus because you placed the trust with me to get Abe's money an' see that it wus used for her education if you didn't come back, that I undertook to manage things while you wus gone. I haven't opened my mouth to Nance. When I wus comin' away, Abe got hold of me an' mumbled somethin'—guessed I'd better tell you he wus willin' to let you have the stuff, sence you're sech a blamed brick. He knows, he says, as Nance is agreeable to goin'.

"Not countin' me, that makes a clear run fer you, an' I've ben thinkin' over what you said, about me standin' in her light an' condemnin' her to a life that's mighty rough on women at the best, an' I ain't one of the dog-in-the-manger kind anyhow, so I—"

"You'll give her up?" breathed Mehetabel, darting to her feet, her tense body fronting him.

He balanced the canoe dexterously.

"You nearly had us over," he remarked aggrievedly.

"You'll give her up?" quavered Mehetabel.

"Mehetabel, I have given her up. She's as free as the birds an' the air. An' you'll take her away. But Mehetabel," he levelled his head to scan her face through the mirk and gloom, "Mehetabel, listen! As sure as there is a heaven above us, she will come back! back to the forest an' me. The forest breeds longin's that tug at the heart-strings an' give no rest day er night, an' I will be in its shade, waitin', lovin' her, ready when she comes home to hold her forever, against all men."

He ended. Mehetabel stared at the rigid water in their wake.

She had won. On the face of things her victory was indisputable. Yet, in her soul of souls, she knew that every word Reub had spoken was true; that, sooner or later, the call of the wild and the love the man bore for her, boundless as the forest itself, would lead Nancy with unerring feet to Reub, and shape her voice with the words of Ruth to Naomi:

"Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou dwellest, I will dwell!"

The Hoop That Rolled Uphill.*

BY DON MARK LEMON.

"HAVEN'T you ever investigated it?"

"No, can't say that I ever did."

"Well, you're a singular sort of man to have a phenomenon like that occurring under your eyes every day, and not investigate it."

"I dunno, maybe so."

"Hasn't any one in these parts ever investigated it?"

"Well, now, since you ask, Pearson's boy — right promisin' sort of a lad was Jeff — he did kind o' lay in wait fur the pesky hoop one evening longside yonder rock, half way up the hill."

"When was this?"

"About last May, ef I reck'lect."

"And what happened? What did he find out?"

"Well now, p'r'aps he found out something and p'r'aps he didn't. Can't say."

"Can't say! Why not?"

"Well — you see — Jeff, he never spoke no more after that pesky hoop came a-rollin' up to where he was waitin' longside o' the rock. Jest threw up his hands an' came a-runnin' down the hill ahead o' the hoop like he was bein' chased by some sort o' devil or 'nother, an' hid himself away in the ol' straw stack over there."

"Singular!"

"Ye-es, et was sort o' singular. An' when me an' his father dug him out o' the stack, he was plumb daft, an' he ain't ever spoke since then. But I dunno whether et was somethin' about the pesky black hoop that did et, or whether he was sort o' struck by the lightnin' as he got up in front o' the rock to git a good look at the hoop, for you see, et was durin' a 'lectric storm that

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Jeff lay in wait up thare on the hill, an' me an' his father was talkin' down here about what a big fool he was, when we saw a streak o' lightnin' hit the rock whare he was waitin', an' then Jeff came a-tumblin' down the hill in front o' the pesky hoop an' hid in the ol' straw stack."

"Did any one, after that, attempt to get a close view of the hoop?"

"Not that I know of. Pearson's boy's trouble has kind o' scared everybody away, an' we jest let the hoop roll an' keep out of its road. We're generally o' the opinion hereabouts that the devil's business ain't none of ours."

With this rural philosophy, the old farmer turned and went into the farmhouse, leaving the tourist with whom he had been conversing standing very much perplexed, gazing off at the sky-line of a long slope that began among a clump of trees about a quarter of a mile away and ended at the bank of the river that wound by the old farmer's domain.

Every evening at sundown for almost a year past a black hoop about four feet in diameter had been seen to appear on the sky-line of this slope at a distance of some forty feet from the clump of trees at the top, and roll rapidly down the incline, to vanish like an apparition within a short distance of the river below.

What this mysterious black hoop was, no one knew; and since Jeff Pearson's misfortune no one had attempted to investigate the phenomenon. The old farmer had even advised the tourist to leave the matter severely alone; but James Moor was determined to investigate for himself, and he now started off towards the slope, when suddenly, from a point about forty feet below the clump of trees at the top of the incline, the black hoop — appearing as unaccountably as if drawn out of thin air — began its usual evening descent, just as if a thick barrel-hoop, lying flat high up on the slope, had suddenly erected itself from the short grass and began to roll down the hill. Only, when this mysterious black wheel had arrived within twenty feet of the river below, it vanished as suddenly and as strangely as it had come.

Three times before James Moor had witnessed this remarkable phenomenon, but he was not less amazed at witnessing it for the fourth time. In fact, the thing grew more uncanny at each suc-

cessive occurrence, and the tourist felt almost grateful that he had not met with the hoop in its descent. If he had, he might now be hiding in the old farmer's straw stack!

Yet, now that the phenomenon was over for the day, he could safely investigate the track of the black hoop. So, setting off, James Moor climbed to the top of the slope and carefully examined that particular spot where the apparition always made its appearance. But he discovered nothing unusual in the ground thereabout, it being like all the rest of the uncultivated land in those parts — covered with short grass, with a few pebbles and stones scattered about, and here and there a gopher or squirrel hole.

Slowly and painstakingly he made his way down the incline in the late track of the mysterious circle, ending his investigation at the bank of the river near which the apparition had suddenly faded into nothing — and ending it in vain, for the nature of the manifestation remained as profound a mystery as before, and as uncanny.

Returning to the farmhouse, he fell into a deep meditation about the matter; after which he dropped asleep, to dream that the black hoop was made of smoke and was bowled every evening down the slope by an invisible fiend, who invariably vanished at the river's bank, taking the hoop with him, into a nice, clean hole in the air.

The next evening James Moor lay in wait near the foot of the incline, with a rifle in easy reach, and when the mysterious circle rolled into range he endeavored to put a bullet into it. But he merely succeeded in killing a calf.

The next evening — this time being careful not to get in range with the cattle — he poured a quantity of buckshot into the thing as it came bowling down the hillside, to be thoroughly startled by witnessing the hoop leap into itself and disappear some fifty feet distant from its accustomed destination.

"Confounded queer!" muttered the tourist. "Must be an apparition after all."

This was on Thursday. On the Saturday following, James Moor witnessed something all alone that he didn't report to his host, for fear that that old gentleman would think his city guest

held the truth altogether too lightly. The mysterious black hoop, instead of appearing some forty feet below the clump of trees at the top of the slope and bowling *down* the incline, suddenly appeared at the foot of the slope near the river and bowled rapidly *up* the hill, to vanish at that particular locality where it usually appeared.

There was something positively unholy in the mysterious circle suddenly appearing and rolling of itself uphill, and the tourist got it into his head that the country air wasn't doing his health any good. Yet he couldn't very well continue his tour until funds came from the city, and to improve his leisure and incidentally disclose his courage to the old farmer's pretty daughter Jessia, he went up on the slope Sunday noon and fixed in the path of the uncanny black hoop a netting of gunny-sack and tow-string.

What a clever thing it would be, he thought, to entrap the apparition and present it, with his compliments, to pretty Jessia. But that evening the hoop made a neat détour around the netting and bowled down the incline, to vanish as usual near the river below.

Clearly, the hoop was no common hoop, for either it had intelligence of itself, or it was directed by some intelligent power.

Three times thereafter, twice down the hill and once up the hill, the apparition bowled unmolested. Then, on a Thursday evening, as the tourist, his host, and a couple of farm hands were waiting for the uncanny thing to make its appearance an immense sow from some neighboring farm suddenly hove into sight high up on the slope near that clump of trees at the top, and as this unwieldy behemoth of the pen came into view the mysterious black hoop also appeared on the sky-line of the slope and began to bowl down the incline towards the river.

Perhaps the sow was up there merely for rootings, but when she saw the rolling hoop, instead of tucking her snout down and fleeing, as the men thought she would, she squealed like some monstrous, disgusting fury, and turning square, hurled her tremendous body with the speed of a vicious horse down upon that apparition.

The spectators saw the uncanny circle let itself out like a frightened thing, and leap and spin through the air towards the river below. But the sow behind was not only racing now — she

was being shot down the slope as from a catapult with the weight of her own monstrous body, and in less than thirty seconds she closed her vicious fangs upon the mysterious black hoop.

As she did so, the apparition seemed to vanish into thin air, and the men believed that the sow, too, had been cheated. But instead of giving up the chase, the sow hurled herself upon something that, instead of going upright like a revolving wheel, went flat in the grass, and began feeding and grunting as contentedly as if at the trough.

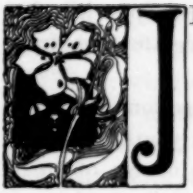
When the four men reached the voracious animal, they beat her off with sticks and stones and investigated her capture. It was a great black snake, fully twelve feet long, and of unusual thickness for that species.

Every evening at sundown, high up near the clump of trees at the top of the slope, this snake had come from its lair — which was a wide-mouthed ground-squirrel hole — and cunningly thrusting its tail into its mouth, had erected its body and bowled like a hoop down the incline, to disappear into an opening in the ground near the river bank. Every evening it did this, save on those rare occasions when, either through alarm or to diversify its actions, it bowled uphill.

. . . Which proves that nature and not man invented that most useful device — the wheel.

The Link of Brotherhood.*

BY DENNIS H. STOVALL.



JENKINS slid quietly out of bed, drew on his trousers and coat, stepped into his slippers, and lifted baby out of his basket. Then he went downstairs, turned on the light, and sat before the grate, in which a bed of coals was still glowing. Without looking at the little clock on the mantel, he knew it was about 1.30 A. M. Force of habit always led to his awaking at this hour to give Baby his bottle, for, when Baby came, Jenkins had agreed to take the night shift, the chief duty of which was to give the young man his milk and peppermint.

Jenkins unrolled his bundle, disclosing a round, red face over which two chubby fists were kneading. Then he leaned forward and held the bottle over the fire. Baby opened his eyes and began sniffling uneasily. This uneasiness was an infallible sign of trouble, for Jenkins had become wise in the ways of babies.

He placed the warm nipple in Baby's mouth and leaned back contentedly, taking a cigar from his pocket, as was his wont, and prepared to pass the time of Baby's feasting in comfort. But Baby would not feast. He refused the bottle absolutely, and began wriggling and twisting in a way that could mean but one thing — "wind on the stomach," or just plain baby colic. So Jenkins laid his cigar by and calmly awaited more alarming symptoms. Baby ceased his sniffling, puckered his red face frightfully, closed his eyes, and emitted one long, startling wail. It was the first light thunder roll that precedes the storm.

Jenkins sighed resignedly, in anticipation of the impending ordeal. For a little while the responsibility of a father weighed heavily upon him, and he half wished he were back in bachelordom. This thing of doing right by posterity is not what it is

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cracked up to be, thought he, as he teetered the fretting baby on his knee.

While Baby quieted to take a long breath for the next wail, Jenkins heard a slight noise in the hall. He sat erect to listen, but wail number two arrived with a vehemence sufficient to drown the din of Bedlam. He concluded it was Josephine snoring, or turning over for a more comfortable position to sleep, while he, poor man, labored heroically to save their only begotten son from the deadly throes of colic.

Wail number three put an end to further reflection, for Baby was at it now with the full vigor of a six-months youth, and Jenkins bestirred himself to prescribe. He had the course of treatment fully in mind, for, as hinted, he was become wise in the way of babies. The usual bric-à-brac on the mantel had given way to a miniature apothecary shop, with a long row of vials, carefully labeled. Yes, first he would give three drops of brandy in warm water, and follow it up with five drops of soothing syrup. He arose and walked toward the mantel, hesitating just before taking the bottle down to give ear to that noise again.

This time it was louder and closer than before, and ere Jenkins could comprehend it, a man stepped through the portière and stood in the full light of the living-room. The man wore a black mask, through which his eyes peered hideously. In one hand he carried a revolver, in the other a dark lantern and a satchel.

Jenkins did not drop Baby. Indeed, he was surprised by his remarkable composure. He took the brandy bottle from the shelf and turned toward his chair.

"I beg your pardon for intruding," said a voice behind the mask, "but in order to get out the way I came in it will be necessary for me to cross this room."

"Go right ahead," Jenkins replied, holding the brandy bottle to the light, "and no intrusion whatever."

The man crossed and reached the dining-room door, keeping his eyes fixed the while on Jenkins. At the door he paused, stood for a moment and asked:

"Colic?"

"'Fraid so." And Baby emitted a yell that proved the apprehension well grounded.

"What's you going to give 'im?"

"Three drops of brandy in warm water."

"No, don't you do it — it's bad business." The man came back a step, and for the first time Jenkins experienced a queer sensation in the calves of his legs.

"Brandy will knock the pains out of a billy goat," the man went on, "but it takes something worse than a billy goat to knock the brandy."

"Then, what's the matter with a little soothing syrup?" Jenkins asked, since the stranger was inclined to argue the matter.

"Just as bad — full of opiates and dope and truck."

"But, see here, stranger, if you were the father of a ——"

"I am."

"Well, what do you give for colic?"

"None of that stuff you're getting ready to use — that's what they gave me."

As if the invitation to assist were amply implied, the man laid his revolver, satchel and lantern on the center-table. He then came forward, watched the writhing baby for a moment and gave the result of his diagnosis: "Yes, it's the genuine, all right; but we can soon bring 'im out of it. Have you any catnip and yam-root?"

"Yes, I s'pose so, but I may have to wake ——"

"No, you better not, — she might object to my medicine. Here, let me have the youngster, and you rustle up the catnip and yam."

Jenkins obediently delivered the baby, and started for the pantry. "Oh, you little goosey-toodle!" he heard the man console, "you've got the tummy-ache, but we'll soon fix you up nice and chipper!"

Shortly, Jenkins came in with the catnip and yam-root. Baby was returned to him, and the stranger bent to his task with the alertness of one who knows. He soon had a pot of water boiling, and the catnip tea steeping. To this he added a portion of the yam-root, finely grated, poured out the steaming liquid, dipped a spoonful and gave it to Baby.

For a little time the sick infant wailed as if in greater agony. Jenkins looked dubiously at the masked man. "It's all right," he

was assured. "That medicine will stir up trouble for a minute down in his gubertorials, but it will soon straighten 'im out."

Baby was given a second dose, and was eased perceptibly. After the third spoonful his wails ceased, and with the fourth he was pronounced cured.

"He's bumkum now, and will take his bottle like a dandy," the masked man declared, with the air of one who has completed his task and feels well by it. He hesitated while gathering his paraphernalia from the stand. He opened the satchel, taking out many pieces of glittering silverware, and laid them carefully, one by one, on the table. "I found these here, but I don't believe I'll need 'em," said he, more to the satchel than to Jenkins. "Remember," he cautioned, turning in the door, "four spoons of that tea as you saw me make it — a spoonful every five minutes."

"All right, I'll remember; many times obliged to you."

"Don't mention it," replied the man, as the door closed softly behind him.

After the man had jumped out the pantry window, Jenkins lighted his cigar, leaned back in his chair and puffed a cloud of smoke to the ceiling, while Baby pulled ravenously at his bottle.

The Hero of Petticoat Pass.*

BY J. O. FAGAN.

THE shortest route between the high veldt and the Leydenburg gold fields winds through a long Kloof or gorge which, once upon a time, was the scene of a very remarkable battle. On account of the sulphurous smells from numerous hot springs and the weird electrical discharges, visible at night between its ironstone cliffs and pinnacles, the Kloof itself was originally known as Satan's Firebox. But later when, in the war with the Macatees, the Boers were routed and one night upwards of one hundred women and children, hotly pursued by a regiment of Kafirs, fled screaming through the Kloof, the name was significantly changed to Petticoat Pass.

But, although the Pass was unusually interesting, its inhabitants were vastly more so. Between the southern gateway at Steelpoort and its northern outlet, near Leydenburg, a wonderfully intelligent race of baboons has lived for centuries high up among the iron-clad precipices. In the early days of the Boer republic, the horseman looking up from the roadway that winds through the Kloof could always depend upon seeing numbers of them stalking majestically across the face of dizzy parapets, or playfully gambolling among the boulders. Amid the solitude and grandeur of these rock-bound fastnesses the baboons, with their blue cheeks, vermilion noses and golden yellow beards, have always held undisputed sway as the lords of creation. They are certainly part human. At any rate, one must confess that they are partially fashioned in the image of our Creator, and thus, from age to age, they have lived in their rocky retreats, at peace with all the world. But in course of time, when the white hunter came along with his deadly rifle and occasionally picked one of them off the rocks, just for the fun of the thing, and when the Kafirs took a notion to

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poison them for the sake of their teeth, then the baboons in Petticoat Pass were driven to defend themselves. In a word, they began to throw stones.

Under no consideration will a Boer even level his rifle at these intelligent creatures. Only an ignorant sportsman would be guilty of the crime, and even he, when once he has listened to the human-like cry of the wounded, as he rips open the wound in an agonized search for the demon of a bullet, can never be tempted to repeat the barbarity.

Almost playfully, then, the baboons began to fling rocks at the passers by. So long as the wagons and the horsemen kept moving all was well, but when they loitered or stopped the whirring of pebbles through the air, and occasionally the appearance of enormous boulders cut loose from the crags above and shot down through the air like cannon balls, never failed to remind the loiterers that they were trespassers and that Petticoat Pass was the private domain of the baboons.

But as time went on it became evident that the intentions of the baboons were pacific. So long as their sovereign rights were not interfered with travel was permitted, but it came to be understood that it must pass through the Kloof on the run.

In their intercourse with the outside world the baboons made no distinction between black and white until one day an event took place that practically closed the pass to the black races forever.

At the Steelpoort end of the pass the Kafirs began to encroach. They built huts and planted gardens on the fertile slopes near the portal. With angry demonstrations the baboons protested, but the Kafirs were indifferent to the clamor. But when the sugar cane ripened the baboons in the night time swooped down from the crags and helped themselves to what they considered their rightful share of the harvest, whereupon the Kafirs, who thoroughly understood the peculiarities of baboon nature, played upon them a villainous trick.

One day, in plain sight of their enemies, who were watching them from the heights above, the Kafirs brought a number of large calabashes filled with a poisonous liquid and placed them in a row in one of the gardens. Then they went through the form of pretending to wash their faces with the stuff, after which they left

the calabashes in the gardens and departed. Watching their opportunity, the baboons came down to investigate the business and, being unable to restrain their hereditary impulse to imitate the proceedings of others, they forthwith washed their faces in the poison and scampered away again. In a short time the venom began to work, the flesh fell from their faces, and finally a number of them died in great agony.

For many days afterwards travellers through the Kloof reported an extraordinary state of affairs. There was much excitement and jabbering and much pitiful crying and calling to each other from cliff to cliff. But when the period of mourning was over the baboons settled down to business — the business of war. The preparations they made for hostilities with the Kafirs were astonishing. Baboons were summoned from far and near, and the population in the Kloof was soon doubled. They divided themselves into companies under leaders. They worked like beavers, and before long huge cairns of stones appeared at intervals along the route, and at places where the crags rose almost perpendicularly from the roadway great boulders were rolled to the edge of the precipices and even ledges were undermined and made ready to slide down and overwhelm the invaders. Having in this way fortified the pass from end to end they established outposts or sentinels on commanding pinnacles. Then they retired to the caves and ravines high up among inaccessible precipices and patiently awaited developments.

From the day when these arrangements were completed the baboons paid no attention whatever to white men, and after two or three unfortunate Kafirs had been stoned to death and torn to pieces the black race gave Petticoat Pass an extremely wide berth. Consequently, the spider-like watchers up in their fastnesses had a long time to wait, but the whirligig of time brings about its opportunities for revenge, even to baboons.

Just outside the Steelpoort end of the pass Max Pincus, a German trader, conducted a small store for the accommodation of travellers. On the day the baboons were poisoned, Max was riding through the Kloof, and came across a little boy baboon, whose face was terribly burned by the action of the acid. The little fellow was crying piteously, and Max took him up in his arms and carried him to the store, where Max's mother, who had some knowl-

edge of remedies, doctored him so successfully that his eyesight was saved. For several months her curious little patient was very shy and wild, but the good woman was indefatigable in her efforts to tame him, and finally she was rewarded with astonishing success. As the young baboon grew up he became very much attached to his benefactress, and there was no mistaking his gratitude. The most curious part of his behavior was his persistence and cleverness in copying everything she did, and she took advantage of this trait to teach him good manners and many useful duties. He kept himself perfectly clean. He ate his meals with a knife and fork like a gentleman, and she could even send him to the brook for a pail of water. He had a nice little house of his own, and just outside of it there was a high pole on top of which he loved to disport himself and display the marvelous coloring of his nose and cheeks for the edification of his friends. Finally his benefactress christened him Stoffel, in memory of a little boy of her own, long since dead, and thus the time soon came when she would not have parted with Stoffel No. 2 for the wealth of the Indies.

But one morning, to the great surprise of Mother Pincus, a young lady baboon came down from the hills and began to make love to Stoffel. She kept at a distance, of course, but her intention was unmistakable, and for a time Stoffel was perceptibly embarrassed. But the maiden returned again and again, her ardor increasing with every visit. She strutted around and coaxed him to come to her, but nearly a week passed before she finally triumphed and led him away.

The following morning, however, he returned, and after watching him for a day or two, Mother Pincus concluded that considerable business was mixed up with his love affair. Indeed, the Boers, who relate almost incredible stories about the intelligence of these colored baboons, claim that the embassy of the maiden was merely a trick to seduce him from his allegiance to his benefactress and that, on his first visit to the Kloof, Stoffel was immediately appointed to the leadership of the baboon army on account of his preeminent intelligence and knowledge of the outside world. In proof of this it was stated that shortly after his appointment a grand concentration or review of the baboons took place and Stoffel directed their movements from an eminence. He was easily recog-

nized by the flashing and glittering in the sunlight of a small mirror which was suspended on a chain round his neck.

One day a horseman galloped up to the store and reported that war had broken out between the Boers and the Macatees and that the baboons in the pass were evidently aware of the fact, for swarms of them were coming down from the heights and were preparing for trouble. Ten days later the Boers were defeated with considerable loss at Johannes Kop and, encouraged by the tidings, the Mapock Kafirs flew to arms and rushed up the valley towards Steelpoort, burning and slaying. At their approach the women and children on the farms fled in terror, and just before nightfall nearly one hundred of these panic-stricken refugees entered the pass, with a large commando of Kafirs close at their heels.

The story of the encounter that followed between the baboons and the Kafirs is derived partly from the account of the Boer women, but principally from a survey of the battlefield on the following day. A few of the hindmost of the refugees had already been captured when, in passing through a narrow defile, the Kafirs were assailed by a fierce rain of stones from the surrounding cliffs. Undismayed, the Kafir horde pressed on, but the roadway beneath them had been undermined, and when enormous boulders, falling hundreds of feet through the air, smashed through the thin crust, great pits were laid bare, into which the Kafirs floundered, and were then mercilessly pelted with fusilades of sharp-pointed rocks. But the real fighting occurred when the Kafirs, filled with dismay at the carnage that ensued in the pits, endeavored to retreat. Scores of dead baboons were sufficient evidence of the hand-to-hand nature of the conflict, while of the Kafir remnant barely a dozen staggered back out of the southern portal to spread the tidings of the great disaster.

On the following morning a very pathetic sequel to the battle occurred when Stoffel, grievously wounded, dragged himself back to his old home at the store. It was a painful and useless journey, for the buildings, including his own little house, had been burned to the ground and nothing remained but the smouldering embers. But Stoffel had come home for a definite purpose. He at once began to scrape and dig among the ruins until he succeeded in finding a few rags and a small bottle containing some liquid. Tenderly